

# VIEWING THE “LANDSCAPE” OF THE GEORGE WASHINGTON MEMORIAL PARKWAY

Paul J. Kelsch, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture, Virginia Tech<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.**—This paper investigates views along the George Washington Memorial Parkway between Washington, D.C., and Mount Vernon, Virginia, especially their role in transforming the Potomac River waterfront from *land* into *landscape*. It discusses the design of a narrative sequence of views by landscape architect Wilbur Simonson and its importance in the commemoration of George Washington, the ideological purpose of the parkway. It places this emphasis on views within the discourse of landscape painting and cultural geographic interpretation of landscape ideology, showing the complexities of landscape values embedded in landscape paintings and revealing a similar complexity in the design of the original segment of the parkway. It concludes with a discussion of the values of a cultural geographic approach for landscape management.

## INTRODUCTION

Notice the Washington Monument out the windshield of your car. Rising above the slight elevation of Monument View Hill along the George Washington Memorial Parkway, it is as impressive a view as you get on most urban parkways. Banks of hundred-year-old shade trees border the roadway, allowing just an index finger of sky to touch the road. Right there, on this bit of framed horizon, stands the white obelisk of the monument. It is at once subtle and dramatic. Subtle, because distance diminishes its stature, and dramatic, because when you catch it just right, it really does gleam like a captured ray of sunlight set against a blue sky. The view even lasts for a while since the road runs straight for half a mile at this point, perfectly aligned with it (Fig. 1).

Still, the monument can be hard to see. It helps if the weather is clear and humidity low. You need to drive in the left lane to catch more than a glimpse of it and a large SUV can block the view all together. All this points to how delicate a view is and how carefully made were the decisions in its design. For as commonplace as they are, especially along scenic roadways, views are often explicitly staged scenes, as prescribed as the roadway itself even though they seem so inevitable as to be entirely natural.



Figure 1.—View of Washington Monument along George Washington Memorial Parkway. Photo by Paul J. Kelsch, used with permission.

Critical to the view is the vegetation along the roadway. At the time of construction in 1932 there were almost no trees in this landscape and Monument View Hill afforded a wide sweeping vista of land and water (Fig. 2). The field landscape architect for the parkway, Wilbur Simonson, framed the monument with loosely symmetric clusters of oaks and maples planted along the roadway. These trees transformed this open vista into a framed view of the Washington Monument (Bureau of Public Roads 1932, Sheet 16 of 45; National Park Service 2009). The trees would take decades to grow large, but the seeds of the view were planted with the clusters of saplings on either side of the road.

<sup>1</sup> Contact information: Washington Alexandria Architecture Center, 1001 Prince Street, Alexandria VA 22314, [pkelsch@vt.edu](mailto:pkelsch@vt.edu).



Figure 2.—Open vista from Monument View Hill, 1932. Photo from National Archives, 32-534.

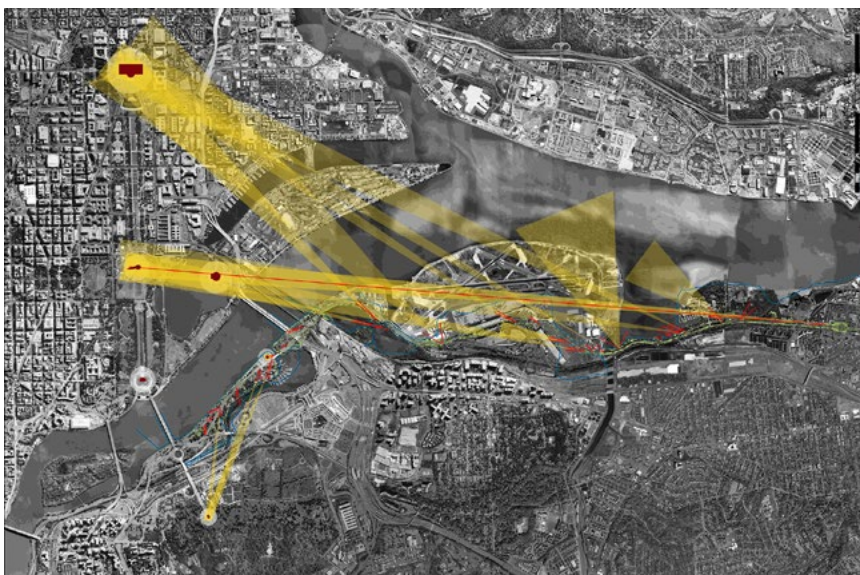


Figure 3.—2007 satellite photo with view cones from 1932 planting plan extended to notable landmarks. Photo from National Park Service #850/100144.

More than 80 years later, it is safe to say that no one knows Monument View Hill by name and few notice its slight rise in elevation. It is too minor a landform. The name only shows up in the original construction drawings for the Parkway, indicating how important this future view was to the landscape architects (Bureau of Public Roads 1932, Sheet 16 of 45). Simonson's planting plans give other clues about the views, too. Among the thousands of circles indicating trees to be planted, there are numerous V-shaped cones indicating important views. The cones are quite accurate. Each begins from a specific point along the road, and each angle is equally precise. Some are quite narrow, directed toward a specific focus, and others are wide arcs, implying broad panoramas.

All this leads to a bit of a mystery. What did Simonson want us to see in the landscape? What was each view of? Here the drawings are mute. Simonson does not indicate the subject of any of the views, only their direction and defining vegetation. Yet because each one is so precise, overlaying his planting plan on a current satellite photograph of Washington, D.C., reveals two recurring subjects—the Washington Monument and the dome of the U.S. Capitol (Fig. 3). The drive north from Alexandria would have been characterized by alternating views of these two major landmarks. (Construction of Reagan National Airport eliminated most of the views so the sequence no longer exists as designed.)



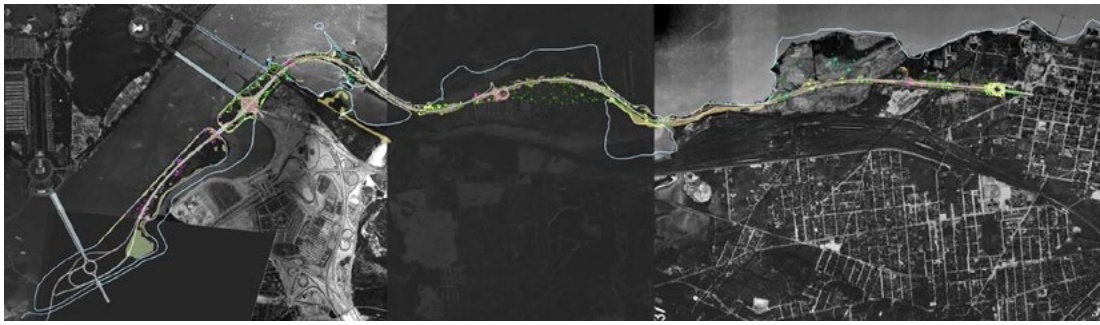


Figure 4.—1937/1943 composite aerial image showing original plan on original terrain, north of Alexandria. Photo from National Park Service #850/100144.



Figure 5.—Dyke Marsh and trolley station, 1930. Photo from National Archives, 30-836.



Figure 6.—Finished parkway near Fort Hunt, VA, 1932. Photo from National Archives, 30 N 32-161, Box 246.

Simonson's emphasis on views is a clue to how the design and construction of the original segment of the parkway transformed the edge of the river into a "landscape" (Fig. 4). Before 1932, people could only get to the river in a few places, most notably in the City of Alexandria and at Dyke Marsh where a handful of small fishing shacks were clustered right on the edge of the river (Fig. 5).

Constructing the parkway changed the riverfront entirely (Fig. 6) (Davis 2001). It allowed people

to drive along it for 15 miles between the Lincoln Memorial and Mount Vernon, experiencing it as a nearly continuous shoreline with places to get out of their cars for picnicking, fishing, and other recreation. It literally transformed the shoreline from disused farmland, woodland, mudflats, railroad yards, and gravel quarries into a picturesque natural landscape featuring a series of views that focused on symbols of George Washington's life and legacy along the river. In short, the Parkway transformed the Potomac River shoreline from mere *land* into a *landscape*.

This paper examines the importance of these Parkway views, situating them in a larger conversation about the ideology of landscape. It inspects that ideology by studying previous interpretations of landscape paintings and extending those interpretations to the physical landscape of the Parkway. It relates this ideological emphasis to the more immediate issues of landscape management and uses it to cast flattering light on the parkway's original design, a design that was overshadowed by later parkways. Finally, while acknowledging the baggage that comes with the ideology of landscape, it celebrates the transformation of the muddy banks of the Potomac River into a Capital River, the mythic home of George Washington.

## THE IDEOLOGY OF LANDSCAPE

In ordinary conversation the word “landscape” is not a problematic term, but within cultural geography the term is fraught with ideological debate. Understanding the history of the term helps put into context the relationship between the land along the Potomac River and its status as a landscape.

The idea of landscape is rooted in Renaissance painting but, as art historian Henri Zerner notes, there is a fair amount of ambiguity between paintings and actual terrain:

“A beautiful landscape,” I say, and you do not know whether I mean a picture or an actual view. This linguistic ambiguity between a work of art and what it represents does not occur in other instances—between the person and the portrait, the still life and the objects that the artist has staged in it—and it exists in all the major Western languages. This may seem innocuous enough, but it does imply something peculiar about landscape, as though our reaction to the image was exchangeable with our expectations of the world in a way it is not with other kinds of pictures (Zerner 1989, p. 29).

This interplay between paintings and terrain has prompted cultural geographers and other scholars to investigate landscape paintings, studying how they represent the world and uncovering clues to social and geographical values represented in the paintings. Examining several of these paintings offers insight into the richness of the concept of landscape and shows how these ideas are manifested along the George Washington Memorial Parkway.



Figure 7.—Giorgione, *The Tempest*. Museo Nazionale Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Venice.

Giorgione's *The Tempest* (1506–1508) is among the first European landscape paintings, and it has defied clear interpretation for centuries (Fig. 7). In the picture, a nearly naked woman nurses a child in the foreground, seemingly disregarding or unaware of a dressed man standing on the left looking at her. The figures are quite evidently posed in the foreground and upon closer examination the landscape contains a variety of potent symbols—a pair of broken columns, a small bird on a roof, civic emblems on buildings—that invite speculation about their intended meaning. Various structures and trees are equally composed in the increasing distance where a river, several monumental structures, and a stormy sky focus the perspective in the center of the picture. At the peak of this deep perspective, a flash of lightning animates the foreboding sky.

Cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove uses *The Tempest* to link the idea of landscape to the development of perspectival drawing in the Italian Renaissance (Cosgrove 1998). He points out that the use of perspective in landscape paintings offers an illusion of control over space and time—the lightning has flashed just at the right moment—and all this visual control



projects an authority over the landscape. The viewer of the painting occupies the single most important “point of view” of the scene and assumes a privileged position over the landscape. From this vantage, the whole scene recedes deep into the distance, enabling the viewer to assert perspectival control and authority over the whole space of the landscape. All this is masked by the implied reality of the picture even though the image is not actually all that real. Lightning never strikes in the same place, forever.

All of this is rather well trodden terrain in cultural geographic circles and Cosgrove’s ideas have spawned additional speculation about the ideology of landscape. While he seems to suggest that viewing land as landscape is somehow a sinister or pernicious act, his interest lay in exposing the assumptions of authority and realism so that other values could be given equal recognition. Not surprisingly, other paintings reveal different insights.

Johannes Vermeer’s *View of Delft* (1660-1661) differs from *The Tempest* in telling ways (Fig. 8). Vermeer’s painting depicts the City of Delft from across a river where its steeples, towers, and chimneys make an intricate skyline beneath an expansive sky. The red roofs of the town are sheltered by a wall and fortifications protecting the watery entrance into the city via a small canal. Half a dozen figures stand on the foreground bank of the river conversing, it seems, in rather ordinary groupings.

Whereas Giorgione’s *The Tempest* is an obviously staged scene, *View of Delft* has a sense of being a found image, more happenstantial than staged. The painting was unusual in its time because it built on a topographical tradition of depicting cities from afar, often viewed across water bodies, and yet it rendered Delft with an intimacy and presence that makes it believably real. The picture has the distance of mapping but the expression of painting, especially in its contrasts of bright sunlight and shadows from overhead clouds (Alpers 1983). All this confounds the boundary between the image and actual terrain, and it is easy to imagine that we are looking at the actual city rather than seeing Vermeer’s interpretation of it. The realness seems to invite us in yet it still keeps us at a distance, quietly watching the town from a detached point of view. Vermeer’s painting transforms the city into a landscape but the ideology is so well hidden, so naturalized, that we do not realize we are viewing a landscape at all.



Figure 8.—Vermeer, *View of Delft*. Mauritshuis, The Hague.



Figure 9.—Peter Brueghel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow*. Kunsthistorisches Museum – Museumsverband, Vienna.

Pieter Brueghel’s *Hunters in the Snow* (1565) (Fig. 9) is a remarkably different scene (Olwig 1996). A group of hunters is returning home at the end of a cold winter day, apparently a poor hunting day since only one carries a small animal over his back. The men and dogs appear tired as they plod through the snow atop a small but steep hill. Nearby a group of women work around a hot fire, and in the village below, numerous other townsfolk skate on a pair of ponds. Many are playing sports, hockey players and curlers are visible, and others go about their daily work. The roofs of the village houses are all snow covered and blend in with a landscape that recedes far into the distance.

Unlike the previous paintings, this landscape is saturated with people—people going about the tasks and joys of living on a very ordinary day in their community. Peering over the shoulders of the hunters, the perspective might be from another hunter in the party or from a neighbor's house on the hillside. Whereas the figures in *The Tempest* are awkwardly posed in the foreground and in *View of Delft* they give scale and balance to the picture, here they are truly inhabitants of the landscape. This is their home.

According to geographer Kenneth Olwig, this combination of community and territory is fundamental to the origins of the word “Landschaft,” the German root of the English word landscape. In the borderlands of Denmark and Germany, “Landschaft” referred to territory where people had a communal form of government reinforced with customary laws and cultural traditions. A “Landschaft” was more akin to current New England townships governed with democratic town meetings than it was to a German county ruled by a count (*Grafschaft* ruled by a *Graf*). In these northern territories, “Landschaft” referred to the land itself combined with the customs, laws, and cultural identity of the community living on it. Given this intertwining of people, customs, and terrain in the notion of “Landschaft,” it is not surprising that Brueghel's painting would depict so many people going about so many different activities.

If *Hunters in the Snow* exemplifies a northern European “Landschaft,” Claude Lorrain's *Landscape with Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus and Mercury Stealing Them* (1645) typifies Italian landscapes (Fig. 10). The imagery and perspective are more naturalistic and believable than in *The Tempest*, but the setting and composition are remarkably similar. The narrative again unfolds in the foreground with one figure oblivious of the other, and they have little apparent relationship to a distant town across the river. However, whereas the story depicted in *The Tempest* is unclear, in Claude's painting the narrative is evident in the title: Mercury is stealing cattle that Apollo is supposed to be guarding.

The story of Mercury and Apollo is typical for a painting by Claude. As landscape historian Mirka Benes explains, Lorrain painted pastoral landscapes in Rome at a time when agricultural production was shifting from cultivating grain to grazing livestock (Benes 2001). According to Benes, the actual fields



Figure 10.—Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus and Mercury Stealing Them*. Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome.

around Rome were overgrazed and the shepherds and cattle herders lived in pretty miserable conditions. Claude studied the land closely, drawing the animals grazing and manuring the fields so that he would have vivid understanding of the terrain and grazing practices, but his finished paintings were lush landscapes populated with mythic figures and people in ancient attire. In effect, he depicted the contemporary landscape as the inheritor of ancient traditions.

Claude's *Landscape with Apollo Guarding the Herds of Admetus and Mercury Stealing Them* fits this pattern well. The cows are believably painted, one or two have stopped to graze despite Mercury's efforts to hurry them along the path, and the bridge and defensive structures are presumably like those outside Rome. The story is an ancient myth, however, and by setting it in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Roman countryside, Claude consecrates the overgrazed lands, rendering them as an idealized landscape. He gives his artistic blessing to the new agricultural practices and the newly wealthy papal families that owned the land.



## THE LANDSCAPE OF THE GEORGE WASHINGTON MEMORIAL PARKWAY

How does this selective history of landscape painting help us understand the George Washington Memorial Parkway as a landscape? Is it a sinister or pernicious act, an imposition of authority as Cosgrove's reading of *The Tempest* would suggest? In part. The National Park Service does manage the landscape with the authority to limit the kinds of activities and uses allowable in the park. It is unlikely that fishing shacks will ever be allowed again at Dyke Marsh, nor will other activities like hunting or harvesting firewood that likely occurred on this land in the past. From this perspective, the Parkway landscape can be seen as having supplanted earlier residents' ways of using and inhabiting this land with a more sanitized and controlled set of uses and acceptable behaviors. In this reading, the transformation of land into landscape does seem rather authoritarian.

However, other readings inspired by the other paintings reveal greater complexity to this landscape. Like the Pieter Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow*, the Parkway landscape is richly inhabited. By design, houses face the parkway across a swath of greensward, integrating the Parkway into the community (Fig. 11). City buses traverse it with bus stops sited so that residents can travel the Parkway to and from Alexandria on public transportation. More obvious is the presence of countless people along its full length: people walking, cycling, jogging, fishing, talking on cell phones, and eating (Fig. 12). Numerous picnic areas, a multi-use path, small parking areas, and several designated parks provide opportunities for many kinds of activities. On a warm summer day, the landscape seems as saturated with people as Brueghel's snowy scene, each acting out recreational customs and asserting their claim to this public landscape.

Like Italian landscapes, the alignment of the parkway and Wilbur Simonson's choreographed sequence of views make a narrative about George Washington's life and legacy along the Potomac River. Landscape architects and engineers aligned the road so motorists would pass by or see various places important in Washington's life and memory: his place of worship; the ruins of his granddaughter's home; Fort Washington, on a site he chose to defend

the city; the George Washington National Masonic Memorial, constructed by his former Mason's Lodge; and his beloved home Mount Vernon (Davis 2001, Kelsch 2011). The parkway stitches these fragments of history into a commemorative story of Washington's presence along the river, a cinematic montage where geographical proximity and sequence evoke a kind of connect-the-dots narrative.

Like Claude's painting of *Apollo Stealing Mercury's Cows*, Washington's personal history is framed with classical references. The Washington Monument explicitly references the obelisks of Egypt, also envisioned as captured rays of sunlight. The dome of the Capitol, where he laid the cornerstone, has its own lineage of classically inspired domes tracing their heritage back to the Pantheon in Rome. The Masonic Temple is modeled after the lighthouse in Alexandria, Egypt, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient



Figure 11.—Houses, multi-use path, and parkway, 2014. Photo by Paul J. Kelsch, used with permission.



Figure 12.—Fishing, strolling, and exercising on path, 2014. Photo by Paul J. Kelsch, used with permission.

World. Collectively, these classical structures, viewed while driving along the river, consecrate the Potomac, elevating its status from a swampy tidal estuary to our own “Capital River,” one worthy of an emerging player on the world stage. In this light, George Washington himself becomes one of those players, his home and his reputed dignity as President becoming part of the larger story of Washington, D.C., as a capital city, rising in importance in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

None of this is very overt. Despite the evident composition of the Washington Monument view, these various landscape perspectives are not immediately obvious while driving the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Indeed, the parkway landscape seems as happenstantial as Vermeer’s *View of Delft*, all of it naturalized to seem inevitable and without design.

## “LANDSCAPE” AND STEWARDSHIP

How might this landscape reading of the George Washington Memorial Parkway inform visual resource management? I see three values.

The first is fairly pragmatic and deals with the management of specific views. The northbound view sequence was devastated by the construction of Reagan National Airport. Most views of the monument and Capitol are irretrievably lost today but one important view could be reclaimed, the complement to the initial view of the Washington Monument.

In the original design, the parkway curved out into the shallows of the river on a new causeway at Gravelly Point, just north of the current airport. Driving the causeway, travelers would be surrounded by water and straight ahead, framed by a grove of American elms, was the dome of the U.S. Capitol. This dramatically composed and sequenced view was the culmination of the whole sequence and would have underscored the classical and mythic narrative of George Washington’s presence along the river. Today, that site is under the glide slope of the airport, and the FAA maintains strict height limits on the vegetation. As trees grow large, they are cut down, and the vegetation has alternated between blocking the view of the Capitol and being an unfocused vista. Currently, the dome is visible but unnoticed because no vegetation composes the open space into a view (Fig. 13). Given the classical emphasis of the parkway in key places, the loss of this particular



Figure 13.—View of U.S. Capitol at Gravelly Point. Photo by Paul J. Kelsch, used with permission.



Figure 14.—Image of George Washington Memorial Parkway c. 1954, used in textbooks as example of good road design. U.S. Public Roads Administration, National Archives

view diminishes the landscape in a small but important way. Reframing the view could reinforce this important scene in the commemorative montage of the Parkway.

This history of landscape painting also shines light on qualities that have been overlooked in the southern section of the Parkway. Numerous design decisions contribute to a rich inhabitation of the landscape, saturating it with people. Yet few parkways integrate this well into their communities, including the extension of the George Washington Memorial Parkway to the north. The northern section was literally a textbook example of good highway design (Fig. 14) and it is a striking road to drive today (Stone 1959, Tunnard and Pushkarev 1963). But it has



almost none of the public use and integration into the surrounding communities that characterize the southern section. From Cosgrove's perspective, the northern section presents the landscape as a seamless detached view being framed and experienced only through the windshield. The southern section, by contrast, is more like a "Landschaft" and is worthier of recognition because of this difference. In an era of rising concern for social equity, the balance of community and highway in the original design would seem to be a better textbook example today.

Albert Bierstadt's *Yosemite Valley, 1868* (Fig. 15) casts a glow on the idea of landscape that yields a final value to this study of landscape paintings. It depicts a westward view down Yosemite Valley with the setting sun casting El Capitan in silhouette while washing Cathedral Rocks in golden light on the opposite side of the valley. The Merced River winds through the foreground reflecting bright sky and leading us deep into the perspectival space of the painting. As with *View of Delft*, this picture allows us to imagine we have just happened upon the scene, and it seems we could walk right into the grassy foreground. Unlike Vermeer, Bierstadt includes no evidence of people at all. The foreground is only populated with trees and rock outcrops real enough to sit down on and enjoy the view.

With its lack of obvious composition or evident signs of inhabitation, it is easy to imagine Yosemite Valley as a scene of pristine nature, free from human influence. It seems, in other words, not to be a landscape at all. Yet the painting is clearly a landscape, and as historian Simon Schama contends in "Landscape and Memory," the countless acts of photographing and painting the valley, as well as naming the mountains and making pilgrimages to see them, are all part of a transformation from land into landscape (Schama 1995). While some might think this is an act of despoliation, he sees it as a positive act because it indicates the extent to which the landscape has become part of our collective consciousness and cultural memory. Whereas from Cosgrove's perspective, the transformation from land to landscape seemed a somewhat sinister change with its imposition of authority over the land, for Schama it is cause for celebration:

Even the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product. And it is the argument of "Landscape and Memory" that



Figure 15.—Albert Bierstadt, *Yosemite Valley, 1868*.

this is a cause not for guilt and sorrow but for celebration. Would we rather that Yosemite, for all its overpopulation and overrepresentation, had never been identified, mapped, emparked? The brilliant meadow-floor which suggested to its first eulogists a pristine Eden was in fact the result of regular fire-clearances by its Awahneechee Indian occupants. So while we acknowledge (as we must) that the impact of humanity on the Earth's ecology has not been an unmixed blessing, neither has the long relationship between nature and culture been an unrelieved and predetermined calamity. At the very least, it seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape (Schama 1995, p. 9-10).

Constructing the George Washington Memorial Parkway did indeed transform the banks of the Potomac River into a landscape (Fig. 16). The informal fishing shacks at Dyke Marsh no longer exist and indeed are no longer permitted. The whole landscape has an aura of formality and authority, applied through the agency of the National Park Service and consistent with the authoritative aspects of landscape painting. But the parkway also allows for greater public inhabitation of this landscape and it elevates the 15 miles of river to be part of the national imagery of the Capitol City. In this regard, it does indeed seem worthy of celebration as Schama suggests. Viewing the Parkway as a landscape is not free of ideological baggage but its particular baggage does allow us to take a pretty wonderful drive or ride or walk along the banks of our capital river.



Figure 16.—View of George Washington Memorial Parkway at Dyke Marsh, 1950. Abbey Rowe, National Park Service.

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